Masters of the water

Puppets and masks of the Bozo fishermen of Kirango (Mali)

by Elisabeth den Otter

Cover photo: along the Niger River, Kirango

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Otter, den, E. *Peuples de l'eau. Les Bozos du Mali*, Paris, L'Académie des banlieues, 2013

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I have done research in Kirango from 1990 and could observe the daily life of the Bozo/Somono: their economic situation, their social relationships, and their masquerades. From 2000 to 2016 I had a house in the Jaka quarter, where the Bozo were my neighbors.

I transcribed, translated and analyzed the songs (simplified spelling) with the help of friends and a dictionary (Bailleul, Ch. *Dictionnaire Bambara-Français*, Bamako, Editions Donniya, 2007).

In this publication the original song texts in Bamana and the English translation can be found in appendix A.

A number of people and events mentioned in this booklet can be seen and heard on my website: www.elisabethdenotter.nl, under Publications, CDs/ DVD's, Videogallery.

About the author

Elisabeth den Otter (1941) studied Cultural Anthropology in Leiden, The Netherlands (1972-1979), and was curator of the department of Ethnomusicology of the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam (1988-2003). In 1996 she curated a large exhibition of puppets from Asia and Africa. She has been doing research in Mali since 1990.

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THIS PUBLICATION IS DEDICATED TO THE

BOZO OF KIRANGO (MALI)

The Bozo/Somono

‘Sanga nyogon jenni ye’

Who can compare to you
When the Bozo appear they fill the space
Bozo, where are you
Where are the Bozo of Markala, the Somono of Ségou
The king of the Somono must receive his part of the catch
The music of the Somono is heard

Who can compare to you
The Bozo capture their prey alive
The hunters of fresh Nile perch are gone
The hunters of fresh dog fish are gone
They who knew the secret of the great river are lost

Death has not spared Mohammed, the prophet of God
No creature is spared by death
The Bozo are lost

Other verses follow, commemorating many people and places, among them hunters and marabouts.*

This is a very well known song, written by Merouba. It talks about the bravery of the Bozo/Somono, and their relationship with the water. Various hunters are remembered in this song. It is said that hunters can talk with the water animals and can transform themselves into those animals.

*For the entire song, in Bamana language as well as in English, see Appendix A, ‘song texts’.

Sung by Mamou Thiero, accompanying herself on half-calabash (guitafilen)

The Bozo/Somono live in Mali, along rivers (Niger, Bani, Jaka) and interior lakes (Niger delta, Lake Débo). They are fishermen and in Kirango they live in quarters on the edge of the Niger river, such as Jaka, Thierola, and Konela. They capture ferocious fish of prey, like the Nile perch and the dog fish, but also hunt large animals like hippopotami, crocodiles and manatees. They live from fishing and growing rice on non-irrigated fields (‘hors casier’). It is said that the Bozo are the original fishermen, whereas the Somono descend from other ethnic groups who became fishermen. The Bozo have names that end in ’ta’ (Karabenta, Minta, Famanta). The Somono are a mix of ethnic groups e.g. Bamana, Soninké, Peul, and have family names like Jiré, Dembelé, Thiero, Koné.

The Bozo fishermen are muslims, but traces of an animist cult to the water spirit Faaro still exist. They consider themselves descendants of Faaro, the water spirit and creator god.

The Karabenta family

Gaoussou and Bannjini Karabenta

This is one of the oldest and largest Bozo families of Kirango. I have known four of the ‘old men’: Gaoussou, Amadou, Seydo and Banjini. Gaoussou, who was the chief of the Jaka quarter, passed away in 2012.

Seydou Karabenta

Amadou Karabenta and his wife

Video ’A Bozo family’ shows the daily life of the Karabenta family

The Karabenta played an important role during the circumcision ceremonies in 2005: Banjini watched the boys that were assembled next to the mosque, Seydou accompanied the procession of the circumcised boys, and Gaoussou blessed them in the family home, where they stayed for about ten days

In the afternoon of the circumcision, around 100 young boys of the Jaka quarter assembled next to the mosque, accompanied by the imam, elders of the leading Karabenta family, and male relatives. After the prayer they all went to the Karabenta compound, where they were blessed by the oldest family member. After that they went to the place where circumcision took place. The next morning the circumcised boys went in procession to the mosque, accompanied by an elder of the Karabenta family, male family members, drummers, and women singing. They were dressed in a dark blue tunic and cap, covered with a white garment, and carried rattles made of calabash discs. Finally, they went to the Karabenta compound; after having visited the tomb of the elder, they were settled in the compound where stayed for about ten days. The oldest Karabenta member attached an amulet to the tunic of each boy.

Procession of the circumcised boys, with their rattles

Seydou at the head of the procession, with drummers

Women accompanying the procession

Gaoussou attaches an amulet to a boy’s clothes

The boys having a meal

The Bird during the circumcision celebration

After a few days, the animals come out in the afternoon. The circumcised boys arrive at the plaza to see ‘Kònò’, the Bird, a cloth-covered frame to which a rod puppet in the shape of a bird’s head is attached; on his back, he carries two small birds made of cloth. This character is very important and was observed by the French explorer Paul Soleillet in 1878. He is followed by two Bush spirits (‘Wòkuloninw’), young boys armed with bows and arrows. Finally, everybody goes down to the river bank to witness the appearance of the Dog fish and of the Crocodile swimming in the Niger river, animals which are feared and can only be captured by the strongest men.

This song accompanies the Bird:

> Kònò, the bird from Kirina has come
> People here have not seen him
> I say, Allah/Mohammed
> I say, whose bird is it
> It's Fatmata Yara's bird
> It's Kanbe Bakary's bird

The reference to Allah and Mohammed reflect the fact that the Bozo are muslims, and the naming of Fatmata Yara and Kanbe Bakary shows the importance of ancestors.

The mothers and the village chiefs give their blessing to the recently circumcised boys; the children of the brave men know no fear.

> A mother's blessing to our village chiefs
> All the village chiefs will give their blessing
> The children of the brave are not afraid

The descendants of Gaoussou Karabenta are praised in a song for the dog fish and Nile perch: ‘I ni baara’:

> We greet you
> We greet the king of Kongun
> The hosts of the great dog fish, they greet you
> I greet the king of Kongun
> We greet the young men of Jakakin
> The hosts of the great Nile perch, they greet you
> We greet the descendants of Gaussu Karabenta/Mamadi Niono/ Suleyman Niaré/Mamutu Famanta

The boys watch the Bird

Fishing

The Bozo practice individual or collective fishing, in order to nourish the family and contribute to the association of the young people of the quarter (tòn).

Video 'Joliba, life along the Niger river' shows the daily life of Bozo fishermen along the Niger shore in Kirango

Men prepare to go fishing

There are various ways to fish: with a trap made of branches and nets (zolòn), as well as different types of nets. The small net is used by individuals, whereas the large net is used during collective fishing when families fish together.

Trap made of branches and nets

Young girl fishing with individual net

Boy fishing with small net

Men fishing with large net during collective fishing

Yacouba repairing his nets

Fishermen repairing their nets

Markala dam

The large Markala dam was built, between 1934 and 1947, 2 km from Kirango, to irrigate the rice, cotton and sugarcane fields of the Office du Niger. This dam should irrigate 9 600 km2, but only a small part has been accomplished.

Between mid-January and mid-May, part of the Niger river facing the village is ‘closed off’, in order to let the fish reproduce, and only angling is permitted. This is indicated by a stick raised on a rock.

Stick indicating the part of the river is closed off temporarily

At the end of this period a collective fishing (party) of the quarter is organized, in which all the families participate.

Fish is sold locally by women, on the market and is eaten fresh, dried, smoked, or in a sauce that accompanies rice or millet.

Fisherman with his catch

Women selling fish on the market

Fish is dried and smoked

The most common fish are the dog fish (wulujègè – Hydrocynus brevis) and the Nile perch (saalen – Lates niloticus). They can be quite large, and are very good to eat, but expensive; the Nile perch is usually reserved for restaurants in Ségou and Bamako.

The people of the village eat various types of sardines (ntinènin – Brycinus leuciscus), carps (ntèbèn – Tilapia), cat fish (kòròkòto – Auchenoglanis, manògò), and tetraodons (dodo – Tetraodon), also known as puffer fish.

Children make simple drums with a can and the skin of a puffer fish.

Dog fish (Wulujègè)

Nile perch (Saalen)

Sardines

Carp (Nntèbèn)

Cat fish (Manògò)

Cat fish(Kòròkòto)

Tetrodons, puffer fish (Dodo)

Drum made with the skin of a puffer fish

In Kirango fish has been diminishing, for several reasons. Too many people fish and do not respect the rules, which leads to conflicts. The mesh of the nets is too small, and consequently the fish sold on the market are too small and cannot reproduce as they should. Because of the Markala dam, the flow of the water is controlled by the authorities, and there is not enough water in the river on the Kirango side. The water is contaminated by activities on the river side.

Fish farming could be a solution, but technical skills and money are needed.

For all these reasons the Bozo change their professional orientation and take up other occupations.

The Migrants

Every year, from October to January, Bozo and Somono migrants camp on the edge of the Niger river. Here they live in makeshift huts with their families and their animals.The men fish and the women sell the fish.

They come from neighboring villages and their arrival coincides with the arrival of small sardines (ntenenin) that originate in the Débo Lake. This used to be a period of plenty, but now there are less migrants due to the fact that there is less fish in the river.

Migrants live temporarily on the shores of the river

With their animals

Woman sorting out the catch

Fisherman and his daughter

See you next year!

The Boat builders

These traditional boats are used for fishing and transporting people and goods. A man standing on a platform near the stern pushes the boat with a bamboo pole in shallow water; in deeper water paddles are used.

Kaka and his sons Aruna and Abba are builders of traditional boats ('pirogues'). They belong to the Bozo ethnic group; Kaka's father came from a traditional Bozo village to Kirango to build boats for the local fishermen. The family still speaks Bozo at home.

Boat builders at work

Aruna Karunta

Kaka Kaunta

Abba Karunta

The boats are of the type 'sewn boat' and are from 7-20 meters long. The wood used is mahogany from Senegal. Instruments used are: various types of hoe, piercer, hammer, file, saw, pincers, and hand drill.

Traditionally, measures are calculated with the body of the builder: underarm and hand for the length and foot for the width of the bottom. The shape of the bottom is then marked off with string, after which a piece of charcoal is used to draw the definite shape so that the remaining wood can be cut off.

The planks are shaped by means of burning wood shavings on top or underneath them, putting weights on the top of them to weigh them down, and putting supports under them to push them up.
The bottom is made from two big planks that are joined laterally by cutting overlapping profiles into the edges. One profile is then blackened with water mixed with ashes, which leaves an impression of uneven spots on the other profile so that the excess wood can be shaved off.
After that the joint is caulked by applying a paste made of baobab powder mixed with water, and covering it with rags. Two rows of holes are drilled with a hand drill, after which nails are driven into them.

The sides are built up by means of four side planks, two for each side, which are joined together. First, holes are drilled near the edge of the planks by means of hot iron staves, after which they are 'sewn' together with nylon chord. Wet jute is used to 'waterproof' the holes and the gap between the planks.

The stem and the stern are made out of separate pieces of wood and attached to the bottom planks.

(In 2006 I filmed and photographed the construction of a new boat , which resulted in the DVD 'Kurundilana (constructeurs de pirogues)', Samaké Records 04, 2007. It measures 8 meters and can carry 700 kg or 9 persons.).

Mahogany from Senegal

Stages of making a boat

For a photo series, click here: Boat Builders at Work

Faaro and the creation of the world

The Bamana have developed a cosmology in order to explain the creation of the world. Faaro's role in the creation myth is described by Germaine Dieterlen (1951):

Yo, the primordial spirit, produced the twenty-two fundamental elements of the creation. He first made Pemba appear, who gave form to the earth, then Faaro who helped Pemba to construct heaven/the sky. On his path Faaro determined the four cardinal points, in the form of water (seas, rivers, lakes) filling the voids. Finally, Téliko, the spirit of the air, comes into the world.

Then the first lives appeared on earth and Faaro gave birth to twins. Pemba created animals and plants, as well as his wife. After that Musokoronin appeared; she planted Pemba in the earth so that he became Balansan, the first tree. In this form he imposed his domination over the human beings born from Faaro. But Pemba wanted the love of other women, and Musokoronin did not want to share him and ceased to participate in the work of the creation. Faaro and Pemba traced Musokoronin, in order to take from her the knowledge that she had received from her creator. They found her, but she refused to submit. Thereupon, Pemba cursed her, and she became mad.

Pemba abused his power, which Faaro found unjust, and a battle took place that Faaro won. Faaro became the new master of the world and he reorganized it the way he wanted. Pemba's curse was the origin of death, illness and hate on earth.

The Bozo fishermen consider themselves descendants of Faaro, the water spirit and creator god. Faaro's den is said to be in Saman, west of Ségou. Every year sacrifices are made to Faaro; the men receive Faaro's council, and sometimes they go into the water to follow him into his domain. Offerings are made of a white cock, white porridge, and other white objects. This

coincides with the ‘installing of the staff’ in the river, to mark the part of the river where the fishermen cannot fish for a certain period.

The story of Faaro and Biton forms part of an epic poem—a long narrative poem celebrating heroic deeds and events significant to a culture or nation—about the history of the Bamana kingdom of Ségou. The legend tells how a young Bamana king, Mamari Coulibaly (Biton), who reigned in the early eighteenth century, acquired power with the help of Faaro. It is widely known by people living along the Niger river, including the capital Bamako, and told by the bards (‘griots’) of Ségou.

Songs in praise of Biton:

Little gold metal
Little silver metal
A man makes his time
One man alone does not reign eternally
Biton Kulubali
He was in Ségou
He has done his time
He has not reigned eternally

Kurun the hunter
King of the battleground
Lord of the war
If someone says that this is not true
You can question Biton Kulubali
He was a lord of the war
If someone says that this is not true
You can question (names of kings of Ségou)

Biton Kulubali was murdered in 1755 ; his tomb is in Sekoro.

The legend of Faaro and Biton

Biton's mother cultivated bitter tomatoes ('ngoyo') on the edge of the Niger river. Every morning she discovered that some tomatoes had disappeared. One night, Biton decided to stay in the field to see what was happening. After a few hours, he saw a silhouette taking the best looking tomatoes from the garden, but he was too slow to catch it. The next night he watched from the riverbank, to see whether the thief came by boat, but he saw nothing. The following morning, however, more tomatoes were missing. He stayed one more night watching the garden, sitting on the edge of the river. Then he saw the most beautiful creature on earth coming out of the water. The thief was not a human being, but a water spirit with light skin and long brown hair. It was the daughter of Faaro, water spirit and creator of the world. She came out of the water every night to steal tomatoes for her parents. Biton said to her "so it's you who steals the beautiful tomatoes that my mother cultivates along the river", upon which she replied "yes, I'm sorry, but my parents are hungry. Come with me and they will compensate you."

This is how Biton discovered Faaro's kingdom. When they descended into the water, Faaro's daughter told Biton to ask two things from her parents. From her mother he should ask to pour a drop of milk from her breast into his ear. This way, Biton could hear everything that was said around him. From Faaro, he should ask a handful of millet-seeds ('fonio'), which he should sow in a large field and leave to the birds. As a result, he would reign over the territories where these birds left their droppings. And so Biton became the ruler of a large territory.

Faaro appears in masquerades, Bamana as well as Bozo, in the shape of a mermaid, with a woman's upper body. This character is related to Mamy Wata, a water spirit venerated in Africa and the African diaspora in the Americas. It is believed that ancient Africa possessed a multitude of water spirit traditions before the first contact with Europeans. Most of these were regarded as female. Dual natures of good and evil were not uncommon, reflecting the fact that water is an important means of providing

communication, food, drink, trade, and transportation, but it can also drown people, flood fields or villages, and provide passage to intruders. Traditions on both sides of the Atlantic tell of the spirit abducting her followers or random people whilst they are swimming or boating. She brings them to her paradisiacal realm, which may be underwater, in the spirit world, or both.

There may be a relation with the West African manatee as well; "Mami Wata" is a common name for this animal in the region. In fact, the Bozo have a pair of them (‘Ma’) in their masquerade repertoire.

(For a fuller account of the myth, see Germaine Dieterlen’s ‘The Mande Creation Myth’. For an English translation of a version of the epic by a hereditary professional bard recorded in 1976, see Conrad, A State of Intrigue: The Epic of Bamana Segu according to Tayiru Banbera’.)

Masquerade of the Bozo

The legend tells that a Bozo fisherman was kidnapped by bush spirits. One of them, Wòkulònin, taught him the art of puppetry. Later, when he returned to the village, the fisherman went to see the smiths and taught them the technique of their construction. (Liking, 1987: 12).

The Bush spirit (Wòkulònin)

The masquerades are very important for the Bozo, who call them ‘do bò’, the secret comes forth. They take place at the occasion of the circumcision of boys of the same age group, about every ten years, or during festivities such as the sheep celebration (Tabaski, Eid al-AdhaEid al-Adha), and also national holidays like Independence Day.

The organization of the masquerade is in the hands of the ‘tòn’, the youth association, under the direction of twelve male and one female members. The boys enter when they know how to fish, at around 19-22 yeas of age; the girls from around 14, until marriage. The main goal is to cultivate solidarity and mutual help between members of the association.

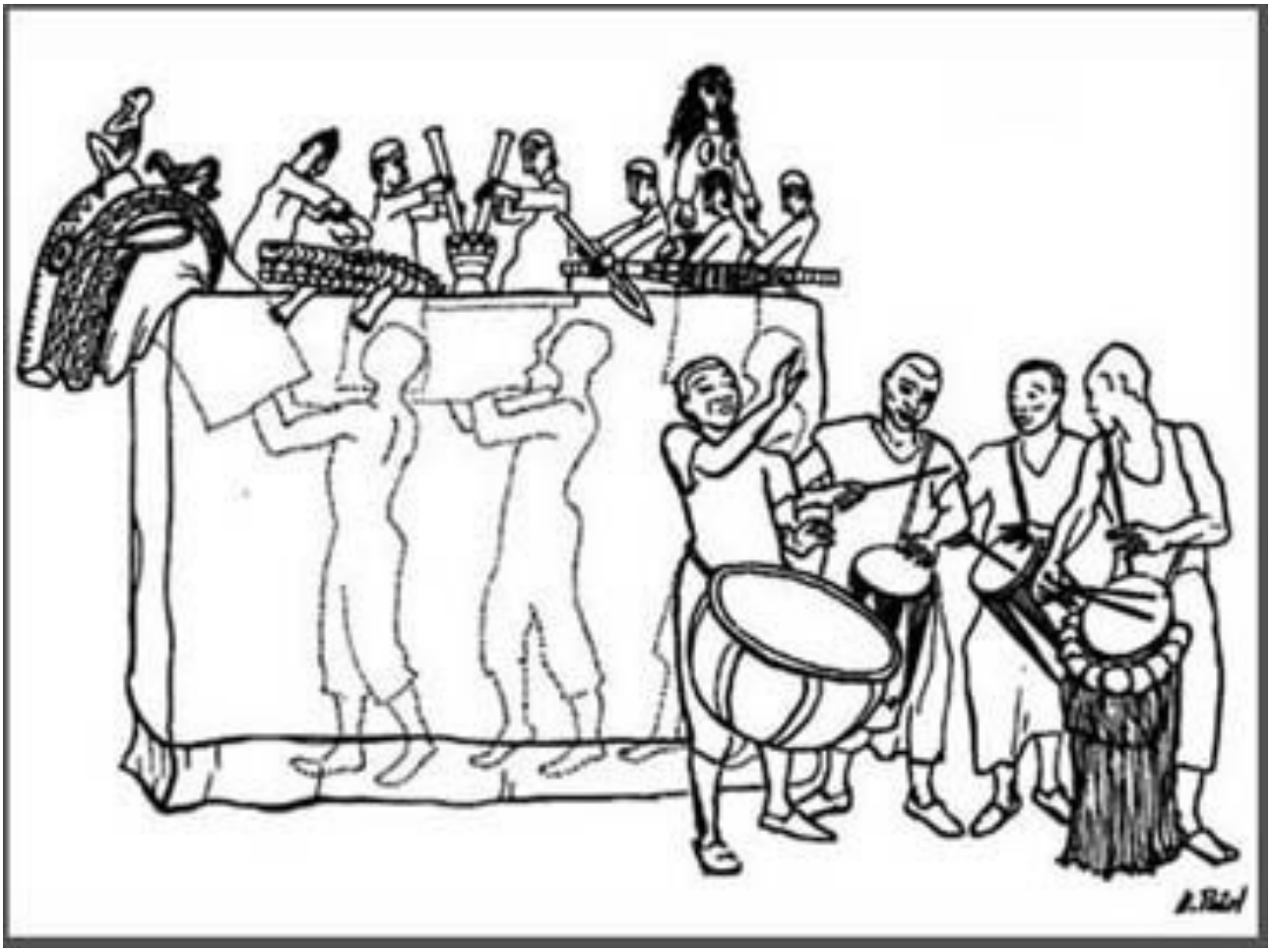
No difference is made between puppets and masks: both are called ‘sogo’ (animal)’ since they resemble each other in many ways and serve the same purpose: to represent mythical and symbolic beings through concealed human beings. They can be viewed as two sides of the same coin, since both are a means to establish contact between the invisible world of the supernatural and the visible human world.

In the legend of Biton and Faaro, the oppositions (Bozo/Bamana and water/land) are ‘neutralized’ by the fact that Faaro plays a role in Bozo as well as Bamana masquerades. There is, in fact, a mutual dependency between the Bamana and the Bozo. Although they live in separate quarters, the Bozo near the river and the Bamana more inland, fish and agricultural produce are sold at the market. During the Bamana masquerade, the Bozo fishermen do guest appearances with their puppets in the shape of various types of fish, a hippopotamus, and other characters. And vice versa: the Bamana give a short performance during the masquerades of the Bozo. This is a sign of friendly relationships.

The water spirit Faaro plays a role in the masquerade, with the Bozo as well as the Bamana. The Bamana show a small version carved in wood, which they call ‘maanin’ (little person). The color yellow represents the clear skin which is the symbol of beauty for women. Its glass eyes give it its mythical character. Her long disheveled hair is explained by her living in the water.

Water spirit Faaro in the shape of a small puppet

She can be seen on the back of Sigi, the Buffalo, together with a crocodile and persons in a boat.



Sigi, the Bush Buffalo, with small puppets on his back
Drawing by Hetty Paerl

The Bozo have a larger version that appears in water during the day and on land during the night. At the Festival on the Niger in Ségou in 2009, the Bozo of the Jaka quarter of Kirango recreated the legend: Faaro, in the shape of a mermaid that swam in the water, and a new bride who was located in a boat nearby. It is said that a boat transporting a new bride cannot pass this place without offering bitter tomatoes to the water spirit; this protects them from accidents and brings Faaro's blessing on the marriage. The song refers to this practice:

> I'm going to visit Faaro's den in Saman
> So that Faaro of Saman gives me his blessing

Faaro with guide

Faaro swimming in the water with singers in an accompanying boat

Faaro presenting a basket of bitter tomatoes to Biton

Faaro at night

The masquerade can be seen as a school: by showing masks and puppets inspired by the fauna, young people discover the animals. Beyond their physical form, they are symbols, metaphors for the good and bad in mankind. The songs that accompany them also carry lessons: they encourage good behavior and critique negative behavior by the individual in society.

During the manifestations one can see ancient and modern characters. There are wooden face masks (Wòkulònin, Gònfarinman) carved by a Bamana smith, ancient characters made of straw made by the young men of the youth association, characters made with cloth (Kònò, So) made by specialists, and modern characters made of a bamboo frame covered with cloth, plastic and other materials They have no legs, and are manipulated by a man crawling on all fours; one might call it a ‘body puppet’. A man with a hand bell guides the puppets. There is always a desire to create new characters and use different materials, like plastic or calabashes

Sharks made with plastic

Crocodile made with calabashes

The puppets of the Bozo are made of cloth, whereas those of the Bamana are made of wood. Most puppets represent aquatic animals such as the hippopotamus, the crocodile, the cat fish (Kibafin), the electric fish (Ntigi), the snail (Quote), the turtle (Tawu) and the scorpion (Buntenin).

Catfish (Kibafin)

Electric fish (Ntigi)

Snail (Kotè)

Turtle (Tawu)

Scorpion (Buntenin)

Types of puppets

Face masks like Gònfarinman, the Mean Chimpanzee, are made by Bamana smiths, and also appear in Bamana masquerades.

Some of them are very old, such as Nama, Falakanin, Laïbala, et Bilanjan
They are made only of straw and represent spirits; they only appear at night.

Others consist of a small frame covered with straw and cloth, with a head attached to the front, like Koon, the roan antelope. They can be seen by day only, paraded on a boat.

Kònò (Birdu) and So (Horse) are large frames covered with cloth, to which rod puppets in the shape of a bird- or horse head is attached; they carry small puppets made of cloth on their backs. They perform only during the day, on a boat or in the public space.

Lately some young men have been inspired by animals they have seen in other countries like Sénégal where they fish for shrimp (zonzon), or by animals they see in books or on television, like pelicans (Taladunkònò) or whales.

Shrimp (Zonzon)

Pelican (Taladunkònò)

Whale (Baleine)

The Bamana have ‘copied’ the ancient characters of the Bozo, like those made of straw (Nama, Laïbala, Bilanjan) as well as Koon, the roan antelope, that the Bamana call Dajè. They also show small puppets in the shape of water animals such as the crocodile, and characters representing fishermen in a boat and Faaro, the water spirit.

’Strong’ animals

The hippopotamus, Nile perch, dog fish,crocodile and manatee are among the ferocious animals.

Nile perch (Saalen)

Dog fish (Wulujègè)

Crocodile (Bama) with hunter

Hippopotamus (Mari)

The following songs talk about hippopotami, the national animal of Mali (which actually means ‘hippopotamus’). It is the biggest animal living in sweet water.

> The hippopotami cry in the river of Sama
> In the river of Sama the hippopotami cry, in the river of Sama
> The hippopotami of Wiro look with their small eyes
> I say, the hippopotami of Baboukari don't look for misery

Sama is a village on the bank of the Niger river. The hippopotami flock together there. They are gentle and no one should hurt them.

There also is a type of hippopotamus that is called ‘red hippopotamus’, due to their turbulence. They often ruin the crops, which forces people to appeal to master hunters to kill them.

The song describes the encounters between hunters and red hippopotami:

> Make way for him
> Make way for the red hippopotamus
> The hunter, killer of wild animals

The hunter is like the hippopotamus. (At times the name of the hunter is mentioned instead of the hippopotamus.) A hunter has to kill one in order to become chief of a group.

This song for the hippopotamus celebrates the hunting skills of the Bozo:

He has taken with his right hand
He has taken with his left hand
He has killed with his right hand
He has taken with his left hand
Namama/Kalajo* has broken his neck

*Namama and Kalajo are hunting dogs

Song for the Manatee (Ma):

Drag the big fishing net gently, in a nice way
The people from here meet people in a nice way
Drag the big fishing net gently, in a nice way
Elisa Samaké* drags gently, in a nice way
The people from Italy meet people in a nice way
Drag the big fishing net gently, in a nice way
The young people from Jakakina drag gently, in a nice way
The people from France** meet people in a nice way

*Elisa Samaké is the Malian name of Elisabeth den Otter.

**The group performed in Paris, March 2008.

People are not equal
The men of Jakakina are in the front
The men of Jakakina are in the back
The men of Jakakina are the strongest

The manatee often perform in pairs.

Song for the snake (Sa):

> The snake, the python
> To kill a big snake is not difficult
> Except for the children who stay behind

The snake is compared to the hyena; both are nasty. The chief of a family is compared to a big snake. If he dies, it is no problem for him, but who will take charge of his family.

Snake (Sa)

The dog fish and the Nile perch are big predatory fish, appreciated for their good taste. They are difficult to catch and cause damage to the nets of the fishermen. Catching them can be compared to capturing a buffalo by a Bamana hunter. There are many songs that praise these fish and the men that catch them.

Fishermen with catch: dog fish and Nile perch

They are compared – very poetically – to a golden mirror, when they jump up from the water or are caught in a fishing net.

Song for Dog fish and Nile perch:

> Mirror
> Dog fish has become a mirror of gold
> Mirror of gold
> Haven't you heard the words of the indiscreet person
> Haven't you heard the words of the person who speaks badly about others
> Trying to come between friends

A performance during the Festival on the Niger

The performances of the Bozo have been much appreciated, from the beginning of the the Festival in 2005. They come with their puppets, singers and drummers and show people a good time.

On the first boat one can see the mask Gònfarinman, the Nasty Chimpanzee, and two large frames covered in cloth. To the right is Kònò, the Bird, with two small birds made of cloth on his back; to the left is So, the Horse, with a rider on his back.

The singers and drummers follow on another boat.

On the next boat two small frames covered with straw and cloth that represent Koon, the roan antelope and Jarawara, the wild beast can be seen.

A fish dog fish swims alongside the boat.

Video of the Bozoo performance at the Festival sur le Niger, 2005

The Mean Chimpanzee on the first boat

The Bird and the Horse on the first boat

Second boat, with drummers and singers

The Dog fish, swimming alongside

Third boat, with the Roan Antelope and the Wild Beast

The songs

The youth associations of the Bozo/Somono quarters have their own singers and drummers. Two lead singers – male or female – and a female choir, some of whom throw large calabashes with cauri shells (‘gitafilen’) in the air, for rhythmic accompaniment.

Singers

Drummers

Women playing half-calabashes

The repertoire is traditional and many songs were written by Merouba. Some of the best-known songs, like 'Sanga nyògon jenni ye' were composed by him, and groups like Super Biton have his songs on their repertoire. They talk about the bravery of the Bozo/Somono, and their mysterious relationship with the water. Many of the songs are sung to accompany masks and puppets during the masquerade.

The singers make a choice between the songs that belong to a specific character. These refer to particular qualities of the characters or are metaphors relating to different types of human behavior. The texts are often cryptic and have to be analyzed and interpreted in the social context. The relation between character and song is not always direct; there are songs that can be sung for different characters.The songs mention the name of the character, the village of origine, the person who created it, or the names of good singers, hunters, deceased leaders or parents. This is done in order to praise as many people as possible, and to transmit a message. Formulas are often used, such as "Somono màsa sòrò sàma ni ba sàma" (The Somono king must receive his part of the collective fishing party), "A ni nyènamaminè" (You and catch alive), or "I ni balimaya" (You and parentage).

The following song reflects the themes and structures mentioned above.

The first verse shows the basic structure; the names of the hunters, their relatives, the animals they killed, and the villages they come from are filled in.

Make way
Make way for (name)
The hunter who kills lions
Moulaye child of Yuba
Moulaye child of Amman
Banguèrè child of Batoma Fanafo

Moulaye child of Banjini
Moulaye child of Ba
Moulaye father of Gaoussou
Hunter of elephants
Hunter of hippopotami
Hunter of crocodiles
Moulaye who belongs to the people of Markala
Moulaye who belongs to the people of Jamarabugu

This song speaks about the great hunters Banguérè Fanafo and Moulaye Samaké. Moulaye Samaké was a famous Bamana hunter (deceased in 2007), and host as well as 'big brother' of Elisa (Elisabeth den Otter) since she first arrived in Kirango in 1990. Some of the fathers mentioned in the song are 'honorary' fathers, such as Banjini Karabenta, a famous hunter from one of the largest Bozo families in Kirango. Maman is Moulaye's mother, and Ba refers to her co-wife. Gaoussou is his oldest son, by his first wife, who has taken over the family responsibilities.

Moulaye Samaké, my ‘big brother’

In 2009, I recorded a number of songs by Mamou Thiero, a well known singer living in the Somono fishermen quarter of Thierola. She sings at the occasion of masquerades, weddings, baptisms, and other events. Her songs praise the great Bozo /Somono hunters and fishermen, mentioning their lineage, the animals they have killed or captured, as well as the villages where they live or have lived. Other important themes are: good relationships between people, persons that help others, and the inevitability of death.

Video ‘A visit with Mamou Thiero’.Together with her her daughter Wawa she sings a few songs, accompanying themselves on calabashes

Mamou Thiero, singer

Mamou Thiero with daughter Wawa

Mamou Thiero with Elisabeth den Otter

Collective memory, cultural identity and the future

Through the masquerades, verbal as well as non-verbal communication takes place. Important cultural information is passed on during this ‘total theatre’, from performers to public. The message is 'wrapped' in music, song, dance, costumes, masks, and puppets: symbolic forms of image and sound. Within the framework of the masquerade, the people of Kirango celebrate their origins and their relation to the animals of the land and the water. It expresses the values of their society and transmits them to the next generation.The masquerades are an interpretation of a world in evolution; the tradition is maintained, but new elements are added.

Some groups take part in local festivals, like the FESMAMAS (Festival de Masques et Marionnettes) in Markala and the Festival on the Niger in Ségou. Since 2005, the Bozo group from the Jaka quarter of Kirango participated every year in the festival in Ségou, with much success. For tourists and Maliens alike, this is a novelty; they see this type of manifestation for the first time and record the event on photo and video. In 2008 the group from the Jaka quarter travelled to Paris, invited by the Maison des Cultures du Monde. In 2021 they were invited again and performed in the prestigious museum of Quay Branly.

A video was streamed and can still be found on YouTube.

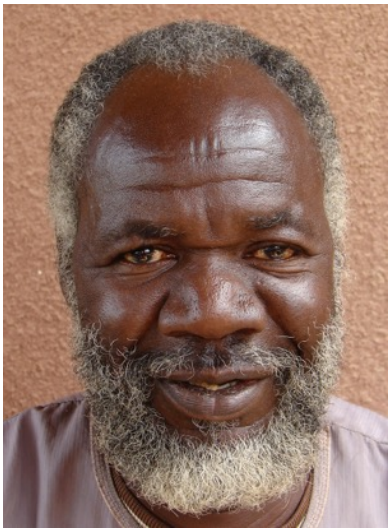
I discussed this theme during a forum on cultural heritage and its management in the Mande world organized by MANSA (Association d’Etudes Mande), in Guinée, June 2005: ‘Héritage (im)matériel: les fêtes des masques bamana et bozo (Mali). Du contexte local au contexte international’ (see my website, under Current Research).

In 2014 the masks and puppets of Markala were inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, UNESCO.

Even though in Kirango annual village-based festivals associated with ritual events like circumcision remain the primary contexts for the masquerades, the process of folklorization of these performances was already well underway in the larger region during the colonial period. Because of factors such as modern education, urbanisation, migration, the influence of Islam, and lack of funding, many villages no longer perform their masquerades. But there are also more recent influences, such as tourism, that contribute to changes in the masquerade. For example, in order to attract attention and increase their visibility, puppets and masks have recently been made larger and more colorful than before.

What will be the future of the masquerades: will they disappear, change into 'folklore' which has little relation to village life, or adapt to modern times?

Sunset



My Bozo friends

My Bozo friends

Appendix: original song texts in Bamana and English

Sanga nyògòn jènni ye

Sanga nyògòn jènni ye, ee i ye
(Who can compare to you)
Bòsò denw yelen ye kènè bò, i yo
(Wen the Bozo appear they fill the space)
Bòsò denw, yo, aw bè min
(Bozo, where are you)
Marakala Bòsò denw aw bè min, Ségou Somono denw aw bè min
(Where are the Bozo of Markala, the Somono of Ségou)

Somono màsa sòrò sàma ni ba sàma
(The king of the Somono must receive his part of the catch)
Somono fòli kan bòra u ye
(The music of the Somono is heard)

Sasi tun bè Gomadaga kònòna
(Sasi from Gomadaga)
Gomadaga Sasi tun bè Gomadaga kònòna
(Sasi was from Gomadaga)
Saya y'o nàani, saya y'o malasa
(Death comforts him, death spares him)
Marifàá dònsòw taarida
(The hunters of hippopotami are gone)

Bamafàá dònsòw bè min
(Where are the hunters of crocodiles)
Sasi Saounta taarida, saya waajiibiyara
(Sasi Saounta is gone, one cannot escape death)

Sanga nyògòn jènni ye, ee i ye
(Who can compare to you)
Bòsò denw y'o a ni nyènamaminè
(The Bozo capture their prey alive)
Saalen kènè fàábaaw taarida
(The hunters of fresh Nile perch are gone)
Wulujege kènè fàábaaw taarida
(The hunters of fresh dog fish are gone)
Bajiba gindobaaw tununa dè
(They who knew the secret of the great river are lost)

Madi Toungara tun bè Cinzani dùgu kònòna
(Madi Toungara from the village of Cinzani)
O kun ye saalen kènè jàtigi dò ye
(He was the host of fresh Nile perch)
Madi Toungara tun ye wulujègè kènè jàtigi dò ye
(Madi Toungara was the host of fresh dog fish)
Madi Toungara taarida, saya waajiibiyara
(Madi Toungara is gone, one cannot escape death)

Saya ma Allah kira Mahamadou to
(Death has not spared Mohammed, the prophet of God)
Saya t'ina danfèn to
(No creature is spared by death)
Bòsò denw tununa dè
(The Bozo are lost)

Sanga nyògòn jènni ye, ee i ye
(Who can compare to you)
Zoumana Karabenta tun bè Ja dùgu kònòna
(Zoumana Karabenta from the village of Ja)
O tun ye Jakakin mògò dò ye
(He was from the Jaka quarter of Kirango)
Zoumana Karabenta taarida
(Zoumana Karabenta has gone)
Sogofàá dònsòw taarida, ma dònsòw taarida
(The hunters of animals are gone, the hunters of manatees are gone)
Zoumana Karabenta taarida, saya waajiibiyara
(Zoumana Karabenta has gone, one cannot escape death)
Karabentala mànka sumana dòòni
(The Karabenta family is silent)

Song for the Bird (Kòno)

Kònò yo, Kirina kònò nalen

(Kono, the bird from Kirina has come)

Yànkaw man ye

(People here have not seen him)

Ko, lailaila, wiyo, Mamadurasulula

(I say, Allah/Mohammed)

Ko, jònnin ka kònò dòn, wiyo

(I say, whose bird is it?)

Fatmata Yara ka kònò dòn, wiyo

(It's Fatmata Yara's bird)

Kanbe Bakary ka kònò dòn, wiyo

(It's Kanbe Bakary's bird)

Baduga

Baduga an dugu nyèmaa

(A mother's blessing to our village chiefs)
Dugu nyèmaaw bèè ka duga

(All the village chiefs will give their blessing)
Cèfarin denw tè siran

(The children of the brave are not afraid)

I ni baara

I ni baara bè, i ni baara

(We greet you)

Kongun màsa u fò, i ni baara bè

(We greet the king of Kongun)

Wulujege ba jàtigilu, a ni baara bè

(The hosts of the great Dog fish, they greet you

Ne bi Kogun masa u fò, u ni baara bè

(I greet the king of Kongun)

Jakakina cèmisèn u fò, u ni baara bè

(We greet the young men of Jakakin)

Saalen ba jàtigilu, a ni baara bè

(The hosts of the great Nile perch, they greet you)

Gaussu Karabenta/Mamadi Niono/Suleyman Niaré/Mamutu Famanta si u fò, u ni baara bè

(We greet the descendants of Gaussu Karabenta/Mamadi Niono/Suleyman Niaré/Mamutu Famanta)

Songs for Biton

Kurun ni donso

(Kurun the hunter)

Kèlèkè yoro la faama

(King of the battleground)

Kèlè kamalen

(Lord of the war)

Ni min k'o tè tinyè ye

(If someone says that this is not true)

I bè Biton Kulubali nyininka

(You can question Biton Kulubali)

O ye kèlè kamalen

(He was a lord of the war)

Ni min k'o tè tinyè ye

(If someone says that this is not true)

I bè [names of kings of Ségou] nyininka

(You can question (names of kings of Ségou))

Sanunègènin

(Little gold metal)

Warinègènin

(Little silver metal)

Maa y'i tile kè

(A man fulfills his time)

Maa kelen tè dinyè laban

(One man alone does not reign eternally)

Biton Kulubali

(Biton Kulubali)

O tun bè Segu

(He was in Ségou)

O y'a tile kè

(He has done his time)

O ma se ka dinyè laban

(He has not reigned eternally)

Song for Faaro

Ne bè taa bò Faarotin na Saman
(I'm going to visit Faaro's den in Saman)
Saman Faarow ka duga n na
(So that the Faaro's of Saman give me their blessing)

Songs for the Hippopotamus (Mari)

Mariw bè wòyò Sama ba la
(The hippopotami cry in the river of Sama)
Sama ba la mariw bè wòyò, Sama ba la
(In the river of Sama the hippopotami cry, in the river of Sama)
Wiro mariw bè yeli kè nyèniw ye
(The hippopotami of Wiro look with their small eyes)
N'ko, Baboukari ka mariw man kani nyani ye
(I say, the hippopotami of Baboukari don't look for misery)

Aw ye bò a nyè
(Make way for him)
Aw ye bò mari bilen ye
(Make way for the red hippopotamus)
Wara fa donso
(The hunter, killer of wild animals)

A ye minè ni kè kininbolo
(He has taken with his right hand)

Ka minè ni kè numabolo
(He has taken with his left hand)
A ye fàalikè kininbolo
(He has killed with his right hand)
Ka minè ni kè numanbolo
(He has taken with his left hand)
Namama y'a kan kari, Kalajo y'a kan kari
(Namama/Kalajo has broken his neck

Songs for the Manatee (Ma)

A yo sènsèn, a ye dimi sènsèn ni ko duma ye
(Drag the big fishing net gently, in a nice way)
Ee, yanka u bi màá bèn ni ko duma ye
(The people from here meet people in a nice way)
A yo sènsèn, a ye dimi sènsèn ni ko duma ye
(Drag the big fishing net gently, in a nice way)
A ye Elisa Samaké sènsèn ni ko duma ye
(Elisa Samaké drags gently, in a nice way)
Italikaw u bi mogow bèn ni ko duma ye
(The people from Italy meet people in a nice way)
A yo sènsèn, a ye dimi sènsèn ni ko duma ye
(Drag the big fishing net gently, in a nice way)
Jakakina cèmisèn u sènsèn ni ko duma ye
(The young people from Jakakina drag gently, in a nice way)

Francikaw u bi mogow bèn ni ko duma ye
(The people from France meet people in a nice way)

Cèlu mankan dè
(People are not equal)
Jakakina cè u nyèbila
(The men of Jakakina are in the front)
Jakakina cè u kòbila
(The men of Jakakina are in the back)

Song for the Snake (Sa)

Sa yo mininya yo, eh mininya yo
(The snake, the python)
Saba sàya ma gele
(To kill a big snake is not difficult)
F'a koma den de ko
(Except for the children who stay behind)

Song for the Nile perch (Saalen) and Dog fish (Wulujègè)

Dùgàre
(Mirror)
Ya ya, sanu dùgàre, Wulujege kera dùgàre
(Dog fish has become a mirror of gold)
Ya ya, sanu dùgàre
(Mirror of gold)

Aw ma nafigi kan mèn wa
(Haven't you heard the words of the indiscreet person)
Aw ma ngùnàfaki kan mèn wa
(Haven't you heard the words of the person who speaks badly about others)
K'u bi mbadenteri nègèbò n'a
(Trying to come between friends)

Song for Moulaye Samaké

Aw ye bò a nyè
(Make way)
Aw ye bò (name) nyè
(Make way for (name))
Warafàá dònsò
(The hunter who kills lions)
Yuba den Moulaye nyè
(Moulaye child of Yuba)
Maman den Moulaye nyè
(Moulaye child of Maman)
Batoma Fanafo den Banguèrè nyè
(Banguèrè child of Batoma Fanafo)
Banjini den Moulaye
(Moulaye child of Banjini)
Ba den Moulaye
(Moulaye child of Ba)
Gaoussou fa Moulaye
(Moulaye father of Gaoussou)

Sama fàá dònsò

(Hunter of elephants)

Mari fàá dònsò

(Hunter of hippopotami)

Bama fàá dònsò

(Hunter of crocodiles)

Marakalakaw ka Moulaye dòn

(Moulaye who belongs to the people of Markala)

Jamarabugukaw ka Moulaye dòn

(Moulaye who belongs to the people of Jamarabugu)

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*to be found on the website

CDs/DVDs/Videos

In 2005 I started my own label, Samaké Records, to produce CD's and DVD's of material recorded by me; Samaké is the Malian name of Elisabeth den Otter.

Audio

- *Chansons bozo de Kirango (Mali)*, Samaké Records 05, 2008

This cd contains Bozo songs: for marriage, circoncision, to accompany dance and masks/puppets during the masquerades.

- *Mamou Thiero : chansons bozo / somono*, Samaké Records 07, 2009

Mamou Thiero is a well-known Somono singer living in the fishermen quarter of Thierola. She sings at the occasion of masquerades, weddings, baptisms, etc. On this cd she sings by herself, marking the rhythm on a half calabash.

DVD's

- *Fête de circoncision/fête des masques bozo, Kirango (Mali)*, Samaké Records 02, 2006

This dvd has three parts:

a) introduction (slide show with explanation)

b) circumcision celebration

c) performance of the Bozo/Somono at the Festival sur le Niger, Ségou

- *Kurundilana (constructeurs de pirogues*, Samaké Records 04, 2006

Kaka Karunta and his sons make boats. This dvd shows the reparation of an old boat and the construction of a new boat, which is 8 meters long and can carry 700 kilogram or 9 persons.

- *Les maîtres de l'eau: pêcheurs bozo au Mali*, Samaké Records 09, 2011

Two films evoke the daily life of the Bozo/Somono fishermen that live in Kirango. The first film, *Une famille bozo* (*A Bozo family*) shows the occupations of the men and women of the Karabenta family, whereas the second film *Joliba, la vie au bord du fleuve Niger* (*Joliba, life along the Niger river*), presents the activities of the people that live near the river: they wash (themselves), they play, and they fish.

Video

Masques et danses des maîtres du fleuve: marionnettes Bozo du Mali, performed by a group of Bozo from Kirango, with an introduction by Elisabeth den Otter, Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris, July 11, 2021

A video was streamed and can still be found on YouTube.